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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH¹

BY F. M. COLBY

FOR some years past we have turned to a certain brilliant group of English writers whenever we wished to be excited or amused on the subject of politics in general. Our own country has raised each year a fair crop of scholarly plodders, single-thought enthusiasts, muckrakers, and system-worshipers, and I suppose one might have found in them just as many ideas as in the writings of Shaw, Wells, Belloc, Chesterton, Kettle, Wallas, and a dozen others, if one had cared to look for them. Sheer ideas, naked or badly clothed, are, I presume, as plentiful in the political writings of this country as of any other. But an idea *plus* an ingratiating personality is rarely to be found in an American book on a political subject. It has often struck me as very strange that American political thought was so seldom accompanied by any signs of literary animation. As a citizen I am afraid of an American anarchist, lest (by a grim irony) he may mistake me for a prosperous person and blow me to pieces. As a reviewer I am afraid of him for the precisely opposite reason—namely, lest he may induce in me a peaceful, natural sleep. The heat of our political passions cools unaccountably between book covers. Hence terms expressive of quite violent political actualities often come to the mind laden, as you may say, with drowsy associations. I am perfectly aware, for example, that Referendum is not the name of a new coal-tar product, of which two powders taken at bedtime are a sure thing, and better for you than your whisky and water. On the contrary, I know it for a very lively matter over which heads have been cracked and may still be cracking. I can even imagine places and circumstances in which I myself might perish nobly, fighting for the

¹ *A Preface to Politics*. By Walter Lippmann. Mitchell Kennerley. New York, 1913.

Referendum or against it. But the word is full of that narcotic reminiscence, from the constant humming of the pros and cons.

Now comes Mr. Walter Lippmann's *Preface to Politics*, concerned with the same themes, traversing the same ground, as many others, and yet with the breath of life in it. Therein lies its value; not in any specific rules of guidance. He says he has attempted to "sketch an attitude toward statecraft."

I have tried to suggest an approach, to illustrate it concretely, to prepare a point of view. In selecting for the title *A Preface to Politics*, I have wished to stamp upon the whole book my own sense that it is a beginning and not a conclusion. I have wished to emphasize that there is nothing in this book which can be drafted into a legislative proposal and presented to the legislature the day after to-morrow. It was not written with the notion that these pages would contain an adequate exposition of modern political method. Much less was it written to further a concrete programme. There are, I hope, no assumptions put forward as dogmas.

His illustrations are very concrete indeed, and taken from the news of the day before yesterday, and they are manifestly tinged with his own prepossessions and prejudices. The good and bad personages in public life are distinguished very swiftly and despatched in a telling phrase or two. He hates all "routineers," for example. By routineers, he means the people who follow precedent and never create one, who go on winding the red tape that they find, who think that the "heaven above them is nothing but the roof." Senator Lodge is a sad example of the routineer. No new perception of popular need will ever dawn on Senator Lodge, he says, and his "manners have that immobility which comes from too much gazing at bad statues of dead statesmen." He hates also the typical university professor and takes as an "extreme example" Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler, who in

the space of six months wrote an impassioned defense of "constitutional government," beginning with the question, "Why is it that in the United States the words politics and politician have associations that are chiefly of evil omen?" and then to make irony complete, proceeded at the New York State Republican Convention to do the jobbery of Boss Barnes. What is there left but to gasp and wonder whether the words of the intellect have anything to do with the facts of life?

Taft also was an utter routineer, who even denied himself the leadership of which he was capable lest it might interfere with the automatic running and the "balance" of the

Government. Roosevelt, on the other hand, is a type of the genuine political inventor.

The hostility against men like Roosevelt, La Follette, Bryan, Lloyd-George, is enough to make an observer believe that the rich of to-day are as stupid as the nobles of France before the Revolution. . . . Statesmanship would go out to meet a crisis before it had become acute. The thing it would emphatically not do is to dam up an insurgent current until it overflowed the countryside. . . . When Roosevelt formed the Progressive Party on a platform of social reform he crystallized a deep unrest, brought it out of the cellars of resentment into the agora of political discussion. He performed the real task of a leader—a task which has essentially two dimensions. By becoming part of the dynamics of unrest he gathered a power of effectiveness: by formulating a programme for insurgency he translated it into terms of public service.

Bryan has been a voice crying in the wilderness, but unable to understand his own message, a prophet without power of self-criticism. "No bracing critical atmosphere plays about his mind; there are no cleansing doubts and fruitful alternatives." He merely expresses "confused emotion."

Roosevelt has seemed to me the most effective, the most nearly complete; Bryan I have ventured to class with the men who, though important to politics, should never hold high executive office; Wilson, less complete than Roosevelt, is worthy of our deepest interest because his judgment is subtle where Roosevelt's is crude. He is a foretaste of a more advanced statesmanship.

Because he is self-conscious, Wilson has been able to see the problem that any finely adapted statecraft must meet. It is a problem that would hardly occur to an old-fashioned politician: "Though he [the statesman] cannot himself keep the life of the nation as a whole in his mind, he can at least make sure that he is taking counsel with those who know." . . . To think of the whole nation: surely the task of statesmanship is more difficult to-day than ever before in history. In the face of a clotted intricacy in the subject-matter of politics, improvements in knowledge seem meager indeed. The distance between what we know and what we need to know appears to be greater than ever. Plato and Aristotle thought in terms of ten thousand homogeneous villagers; we have to think in terms of a hundred million people of all races and all traditions, crossbred and inbred, subject to climates they have never lived in before, plumped down on a continent in the midst of a strange civilization.

From these citations it may appear that he has merely applied to politics the methods of literary impressionism, and there is, I admit, a good deal of mental slap-dash to be found in the volume from first to last. He has, for example, swallowed whole and not digested too many of the "visions" of Mr. H. G. Wells. And he is apt to describe as "dynamic"—a word of which he is inordinately fond—instances of mere verbal jumpiness, as when Mr. G. K.

Chesterton makes a sentence end in a manner not expected by the readers of the London *Sketch*, and then says it is a paradox emerging from the hidden wells of truth. He has read too much of the hop-skip-and-jump fellows, and his style is too streaked with their enormous generalities.

Yet it is true that "our political thinking needs the infusion of contemporary insights," needs also the vivacities and vagaries of the literary mind, and it is a pleasant thing to see a literary man going into politics with all his sins upon him. It is an unwonted spectacle in this country where we are accustomed to see, rather, the process reversed—politics going into the literary man. Mr. Lippmann has proven that a writer even after becoming political may remain ingenious, witty, fanciful, and personally distinguishable from the material he has consumed. He is "unsafe," of course, in all "practical" senses. I suppose he would make an abominable alderman. That, however, is beside the question, for he is not trying to lead the mind to any particular point, but merely to set it in motion, for he has seen that the danger of American political discussion was not so much that it made one think wrongly as that it did not make one think at all.

It has been assumed in this country that politics are a very jealous god. We have taken it as a sign that a man was fit for them merely because he was fit for nothing else. A British writer recently complained that Parliament contained only lawyers and politicians and was impervious to any new idea. Yet from our point of view the personnel of the British Government has by contrast seemed astounding in its variety. Every sort of unpractical creature, from a mousy old classical scholar to the lightest possible literary character, has found its way into it and has often remained there without disgrace. And of men distinguished for other things than legal, political, or business abilities, one could mention in a short interval names like Salisbury, Balfour, Morley, Bryce, Lecky, Curzon, Dilke, Rosebery, McCarthy, and a dozen others. During the same period in this country we should very likely, after naming with some confidence John Hay and Theodore Roosevelt, have had to stammer with a painful blush the name of Ignatius Donnelly. Present comparisons would be almost equally odious, but there is no need of going further in so plain a matter as our disadvantage in political discussion. The champions of our bad

causes have added insult to injury by advocating them in language even worse. If it is true, as Chateaubriand said, that a couple of phrases will always intoxicate a Frenchman, they are at least good phrases as a rule. We generally do our tipping on the bad ones.

Behold a republic resting securely upon the foundation stones quarried from the mountains of eternal truth. . . . Behold a republic proclaiming to the world the doctrine of equality. Behold a republic in which civil and religious liberty stimulate all to earnest endeavor. . . . Behold a republic standing erect while empires are bowed down. Behold a republic increasing in population.

You may not like to think it, but that was a very powerful bit of political writing in its day.

For these reasons the present volume seems by contrast a remarkable achievement, and its writer should be praised first of all on grounds that may seem rather negative. He has not written of American politics in the customary manner, through the nose. The above citations hardly do justice to the spirit of his work. His main contentions are that,

instead of tabooing our impulses, we must redirect them. Instead of trying to crush badness, we must turn the power behind it to good account. The assumption is that every lust is capable of some civilized expression. . . . Politics is not concerned with prescribing the ultimate qualities of life. When it tries to do so by sumptuary legislation, nothing but mischief is invoked. Its business is to provide opportunities, not to announce ultimate values; to remove oppressive evil and to invent new resources of enjoyment. With the enjoyment itself it can have no concern. That must be lived by each individual. In a sense the politician can never know his own success, but it is registered in men's inner lives, and is largely incommunicable. An increasing harvest of rich personalities is the social reward of fine statesmanship, but rich personalities are free growths in a cordial environment. They cannot be cast in molds or shaped by law. There is no need, therefore, to generate dialectical disputes about the final goal of politics. No definition can be just—too precise a one can only deceive us into thinking that our definition is true. Call ultimate values by any convenient name, it is of slight importance which you choose. If only men can keep their minds freed from formalism, idol worship, fixed ideas, and exalted abstractions, politicians need not worry about the language in which the end of our striving is expressed. For with the removal of distracting idols, men's experience becomes the center of thought. And if we think in terms of men, find out what really bothers them, seek to supply what they really want, hold only their experience sacred, we shall find our sanction obvious and unchallenged.

Elsewhere he puts the matter more concretely:

When politics revolves mechanically it ceases to use the real energies of a nation. Government is then at once irrelevant and mischievous—mere

obstructive nuisance. Not long ago a prominent Senator remarked that he didn't know much about the country, because he had spent the last few months in Washington. It was a profound utterance, as any one can testify who reads, let us say, the *Congressional Record*. For that document, though replete with language, is singularly unacquainted with the voices that agitate the nation.

He believes that political thinking takes too little account of human diversity; that the *politikon zöon*, or "sober, safe, thinking citizen" of current discussion is an abstraction, quite on a par with the "economic man" of the Manchester school; that reformers look for salvation by the mere substitution of one bit of mechanism for another; that political leadership involves experiment; that the fear of violating the Constitution is not the beginning of wisdom; that political issues should correspond to the actual issues that divide men. His book is an attempt to find a philosophic basis, or, if you prefer, an excuse, for the continuous expansion and renovation of political machinery in response to the changes in society. In short, he believes what several millions of his fellow-countrymen believe; but when it comes to the expression of his beliefs and the application of them the difference between him and the usual political writer or leading citizen is enormous. Apart from a very humane and reasonable criticism of the Report of the Chicago Vice Commission, he does not try to set people right on any of the actual political questions of the moment. He accomplishes the more difficult feat of putting them in the mood for inquiry. And I think this justifies him, although he is manifestly afflicted with the kinetomania of progress-worship of his day, and believes that Christianity and almost every other old thing are "failures."

F. M. COLBY.